Chapter One

At the Dawn of Freedom

The long, long years of *law* against slaves learning to read, has created in them a deep determination to master all the difficulties that lie in the way of gaining knowledge now that a way is opened.

National Freedmen's Relief Association, 1863

I never saw people more anxious nor Schollars labor harder to learn.

Robert Lindsey, former slave owner and Confederate veteran, 1869

Their steady eagerness to learn is just something amazing. To be deprived of a lesson is a severe punishment. "I got no reading to-day," or no writing, or no sums, is cause for bitter tears. This race is going to rise. It is biding its time.

Laura Towne, 1877

At the very dawn of freedom, well before the nation moved grudgingly toward formal emancipation, southern black slaves began to forge their own destiny. From the first days of freedom, through the displacements of war, and into Reconstruction, they pursued many strategies calculated to assure their self-emancipation. During the war, they fled plantations to reach Union lines. They reconstituted families, built their own churches, negotiated contracts. And they demanded access to literacy. They raised teachers from the literate among themselves, welcomed teachers from afar, even urged former slave owners to teach them, and filled schoolhouses to overflowing. Out of their great poverty they raised funds to buy land for their schools, supplied the labor to build the schools, supported teachers as best they could, and maintained such an

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AN: 343672 ; Ronald E. Butchart.; Schooling the Freed People : Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876
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effective network of schools across the South after the Civil War that W. E. B. Du Bois could argue that the postwar system of southern public education arose from the foundation laid by the freed people.[1]

Slavery's great failure lay in its inability to crush the black longing to read and write. The dream of literacy would not die despite two and a half centuries of bondage and enforced illiteracy. Many of the slave states made it a crime to teach slaves to read and write. Where black literacy was not banned by law, it was effectively banned by custom. Many slaveholders meted out fearsome punishment to slaves who were caught with reading or writing materials. Literacy opened the possibility of encountering ideas opposed to human bondage and carried the potential of written communication between black conspirators. More important ideologically, keeping the masses of African Americans illiterate contributed to the myth of racial inferiority, a conveniently circular logic: blacks were intellectually incapable of mastering the skills of literacy; illiterate blacks were proof of black intellectual incapacity. Though some slaves succeeded in stealing their literacy and an occasional slaveholder taught a favored slave to read and write, it is likely that by the time of the American Civil War, not more than one in ten southern blacks were literate. Yet the black desire for literacy burned bright to the very end of slavery.[2]

African Americans acted on the possibilities of freedom with an overwhelming surge toward the schoolhouse door. As W. E. B. Du Bois observed, African Americans responded to their flight from slavery differently than any other largely illiterate people freed from bondage. Most former serfs and slaves have assumed that ignorance was their natural lot, or they have embraced their folk wisdom as superior to formal learning. "American Negroes never acted thus," Du Bois wrote. "The very feeling of inferiority which slavery forced upon them fathered an intense desire to rise out of their condition by means of education."[3] Seventy years earlier, as the freed people's response to emancipation was first manifesting itself, John W. Alvord, superintendent of freedmen's education within the Freedmen's Bureau, made the same observation. "This is a wonderful state of things," he wrote in his January 1866 report. "We have just emerged from a terrific war; peace is not yet declared. There is scarcely the beginning of reorganized society at the south; and yet here is a people long imbruted by slavery, and the most despised of any on earth, whose chains are no sooner broken than they spring to their feet and start up an exceeding great army, clothing themselves with intelligence. What other people on earth have ever shown, while in their ignorance, such a passion for education?"[4]

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The education of the freed people was, first and foremost, an education by African Americans, the work of the freed people themselves and of black Americans from the northern states. The freed people welcomed the help of northern white teachers and northern aid organizations, though they resented the paternalism and arrogance of the white efforts. In the end, however, the black community gave much more toward their own educational emancipation than did the far wealthier and far more numerous people that surrounded them. Indeed, the efforts of whites in black schools from the dawn of freedom and into Reconstruction were often equivocal and contradictory to the best interests of a truly free people. But to understand that story, it is necessary first to explore the unprecedented response of African Americans to freedom and the freedom to learn.

The freed people's demand for literacy overawed all efforts to accommodate it. In the first decade of freedom, teachers often taught in classrooms numbering one hundred students or more. Harriet Buss, teaching alone on an isolated island plantation in South Carolina in 1863, had 118 students in her school.[5] Fannie J. Scott taught over 200 students with her sister in Vicksburg in 1864 and delighted in her students' great "zeal to learn."[6] A graduate of Mount Holyoke established the first black school in Sumter, South Carolina, in the summer of 1865, and immediately attracted over one hundred students. She gave that school to two other teachers and ventured further into the interior, establishing a second school in Dover Depot that quickly had one hundred students.[7] In 1866, Trinity School in Augusta, Georgia, "one of the smallest schools in the city," had over 160 students on its rolls and over one hundred in daily attendance studying under a single teacher.[8] In 1869, a black teacher working on the coast of Georgia reported that she had to close her school to new students when enrollment "increased to 125 and they kept coming."[9] In 1872, Sallie B. Gove had 130 students a day, "all crowded together in a small house that has neither door nor window." Two months later she had gained an assistant, but her school had increased to over 200.[10] As more teachers were recruited, classroom crowding eased, though students continued to number fifty or more per class in the cities before the 1870s.[11]

Nor did the black demand for schools fade after its initial flowering in the springtime of emancipation. Despite predictions that black schooling was a passing fancy of a childlike people, despite the precipitous decline in northern support by the end of the 1860s, and despite rising violence against black education in the course of Reconstruction, the freed people were determined to educate their children, even as poverty drove the

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adults back to fields and shops. More than a decade after emancipation, Elizabeth Hyde Botume reported that her students at Beaufort, South Carolina, continued to protest having to take recess and were reluctant to "put up their work when the bell rings for the closing of the school."[12] Caroline Alfred, who taught in the black Claflin School in Columbus, Georgia, beginning in 1867 and observed the Deep South's descent into terrorist violence in the 1870s, could still report in 1875 that "the interest in the school among the colored people seems greater than I have ever known it."[13] "It rained one day last week," Laura Towne wrote in her diary in 1877, "but through the pelting showers came nearly every blessed child. Some of them walk six miles and back, besides doing their task of cotton-picking. Their steady eagerness to learn is just something amazing."[14] In the course of a single decade, black school attendance quintupled from less than 2 percent of all African Americans on the eve of the American Civil War, virtually all in the northern states, to nearly 10 percent by 1870, held down not by lack of desire but by lack of teachers and funds. In the following decade, it tripled again, to nearly one-third of black children of school age.[15] The initial burst of black schooling was not confined to elementary literacy; a mere decade after emancipation, the southern freed people and their supporters had established well over one hundred secondary and postsecondary schools, most of which continued to serve black students far into the twentieth century.[16]

The first teachers to respond to this fierce will to know were themselves African Americans. Months before northern missionary societies and freedmen's aid groups organized their work, black teachers who for years had shared the forbidden codes of literacy in the shadow of slavery threw off their veil of secrecy. In Washington and Baltimore, where free black children and an occasional favored enslaved child had quietly attended private black schools before the war, black teachers opened their schools to all black children. Around Norfolk and Alexandria, Virginia, and on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, where Union forces gained their first toeholds in the Confederacy, other black teachers opened the first "free" schools.[17]

By the end of 1861, at least forty southern black teachers had expanded their schools or established new schools to accommodate the swelling masses of eager students. Six months later, those forty southern black teachers constituted nearly half of all teachers working in the freed people's schools. Fifty more were teaching by the summer of 1863, including nearly a dozen northern black teachers. By the time the war ended two years later, over 280 African Americans, most of them literate southern

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blacks, were answering the urgent call of their people. African Americans constituted one-eighth of the nation in 1860; literate African Americans could not have accounted for one-fiftieth of the nation.[18] Yet here in 1865, at the dawn of freedom, well over one-quarter of the freed people's first tutors were their own people. Some of those early black instructors taught briefly, until more capable teachers could be found, but most taught much longer than their northern white counterparts.[19]

The freed people did not wait for experienced teachers to begin the literacy work. So eager were they for schools that black settlements organized themselves into learning communities or created schools and pressed their literate members into sharing their knowledge. Slaves fleeing into Kansas in the first confusion of the war immediately started a school in Lawrence with one hundred students. Within days of the Union occupation of New Orleans, black schools sprang up and literate free blacks were urged into service as teachers. The black community pressured commanding general Nathaniel Banks to organize the black schools of New Orleans into a public system. When the federal government suspended the schools in November 1865, black New Orleans immediately opened private schools across the city staffed with black teachers.[20] In 1864, an agent of the National Freedmen's Relief Association went into the rural parishes of Louisiana to establish schools but reported that "the colored people themselves were ahead of us," with flourishing schools in operation supported by a tuition system that exempted orphans and students with fathers in the military.[21] When Mary S. Osborne, a northern white teacher, went to Church Creek, Maryland, in 1865 to establish a school, she found that the people had already organized one "immediately on their emancipation, and for nearly a year those who had been able by any means to gain a knowledge of letters have been imparting it to others."[22]

In Georgia the freed people, "assisted by a few white friends," created the Georgia Education Association in January 1866, a sophisticated organization with county-level affiliates, each with its own officers. The task of county affiliates was to create schools, "provide the schoolhouses, employ and pay the teachers," with expenses to be borne by "the scholars and their parents."[23] Even earlier, the freed people of Marietta, Georgia, had created the Marietta Freedmen's Association, possibly the model for the later statewide organization.[24] One year after the war ended, thirty of the thirty-five black schools in Missouri were "sustained almost entirely by the struggles of the colored people." Thirty-three black teachers taught in those thirty schools.[25] The spontaneous movement of southern African Americans to

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launch their own schools and support their own teachers prompted one Freedmen's Bureau agent to contrast their work with southern whites. In Wilmington, North Carolina, he wrote, "the Freedmen have started a school of their own, and employ at their own expense a colored teacher. A similar movement is commencing among the Freedmen in several other places, evincing a thirst for knowledge and a desire for improvement that finds *no parallel* among that numerous and degraded class, the 'poor whites.' "[26]

The military witnessed equivalent educational enterprise among black troops and black civilian laborers. Those black adult learners bought spellers and primers, cajoled literate white soldiers to tutor them or chaplains to set up classes for them, and subscribed funds to pay teachers for their services. One black regiment raised $700 in four months for its own education and donated another $60 to maintain a school for the black children of a nearby town.[27] Black laborers working in one white regiment prevailed upon the regimental chaplain to open a school for them in their few leisure hours.[28] The 7th U.S. Colored Infantry established a literacy education program for the black noncommissioned officers. Those men in turn and on their own initiative created classes for their privates, teaching the soldiers what they had learned in their own lessons.[29]

Southern African Americans emerged from bondage penniless, often with little more than the clothing on their backs. Their stupendous poverty was rendered more grinding in the years immediately following the Civil War. Their embittered former owners attempted to do without their labor or routinely defrauded African Americans when they did hire them. Extraordinary crop failures due to floods, droughts, and insects in the later 1860s made matters worse for whites and blacks. Yet in spite of their poverty, the freed people found ways to purchase land for school purposes, lumber for the schoolhouse, and schoolbooks for themselves and their children. Their unpaid labor built the schoolhouses. They paid tuition to teachers and often boarded the teachers as well. They supplied fuel for heat in cold weather. In Georgia, for example, by late 1866 the freed people were fully supporting fifty-six of the state's one hundred black schools and half their 113 teachers. The black Georgia Education Association asserted, "This result has been accomplished by patient but organized effort, carried on through great difficulties."[30] As the Freedmen's Bureau closed its books in 1870, a wealthy nation had, through the bureau, expended roughly five and a quarter million dollars to assist southern black education. By 1870, all of the northern freedmen's aid societies combined, drawing on the

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philanthropy and benevolence of the wealthy North, had raised and spent about eight million dollars. The freed people, landless, impoverished, surrounded by bitter, angry southern whites, raised and expended another two to four million dollars, counting only the expenditures for the schools that the bureau tracked. They may well have doubled that amount if we consider the value of the donated labor of those who built and maintained schoolhouses, the value of board for teachers and fuel to heat the buildings, the value of the labor of underpaid black teachers, and the other intangible costs they bore to assure access to literacy.[31]

Learners of all ages attended the earliest schools, "from the gray-headed old man with his spectacles, down to the child of six years." By the mid-1860s, adults increasingly had to attend night school so that they could work during the daytime, and the black day school began to look more like traditional schools, filled with school-age children. As the adults sacrificed for their children's education, the children manifested the same dogged commitment to education as their parents. Older students whose labor was needed in the fields worked early and showed up at the schoolhouse door after midday despite many hours of work. In many southern cities, black children attended with greater regularity and in greater numbers than white students until well into Reconstruction when Redeemer governments cut funding and reduced the school year. Black students routinely begged teachers to skip recess, to hold classes through traditional holidays, and to continue teaching through the summer vacation.[32] When teachers did cease teaching for vacation or to escape the southern summer heat, students and parents looked for others to carry the school through vacation. "That schools should be kept open through all the warmth of a summer vacation, with a full and voluntary attendance of the pupils, seems rather incredible," William R. Hooper wrote in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1869.

> That they should be kept open nearly under the Tropics, in all the heat of a Southern summer, seems more incredible. But that they should be kept open in summer, under a tropical climate, at the request of the boys and girls themselves, and partly at their expense, seems altogether incredible: it is not juvenile human nature. And yet it is the fact. So desirous of learning are the dark-hued scholars of our Southern States that their schools, when closed for the three months of summer, that their Northern teachers may return home to recuperate, have been reopened and their old teachers either engaged to remain or new ones been employed of their own color.[33]

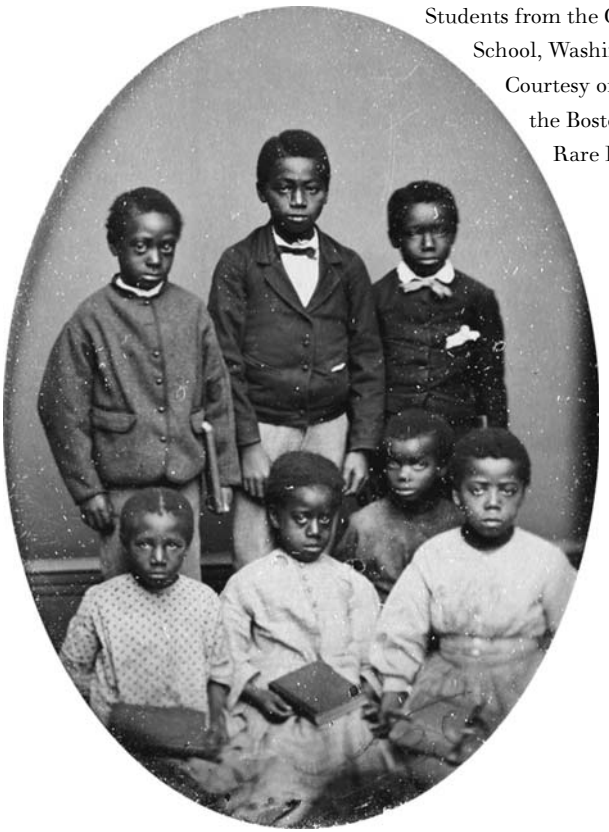
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an occasional white teacher in the early black schools was certain that the freed people did not understand the meaning of schooling or have "any deep and intelligent conviction of the true value of education, though delighted with the novelty of it."[34] Most of the teachers had a more positive, though often vague, sense of what the freedmen thought of schooling. Still, it is the former view that dominated the thinking about the freed people's education for most of a century of historical writing. Walter L. Fleming, writing in 1905, claimed that, as a result of their inherently childlike nature, the freed people flocked to schools to imitate white masters and enjoy forbidden privileges. Fifty years later, a leading historian of the Freedmen's Bureau could only understand the longing for literacy as a nearly religious faith. "In learning to read," George R. Bentley wrote, "he was eating of the fruit so long forbidden to him, and he was entering a Mystery which seemed almost holy."[35] In an essay that in other regards has revisionist overtones, Edgar B. Wesley suggested that the freed people "caught the vision of education as the magic carpet on which to float onto social prestige, economic security, political power, and general superiority. They were eager to possess this talisman that elevated its owner and insured a life of dignity and ease."[36]

Nothing in the words or actions of the freed people sustains such claims. Rather, the claims reflect the historians' response to the sheer effrontery of an enslaved people demanding, as free women and men, the rights jealously reserved for those who enslaved them. Their actions, from adults who had to " 'fight long' with their lessons," to children "whose eagerness to learn surpasses any thing I ever knew before among men," bespoke a people inured to hard struggle, a people who knew that there were no magic carpets.[37] But they also knew that formal learning had value, no matter the struggle required to gain it. They had spent more than two centuries observing the powerful with formal learning, as well as the poor largely without it, and knew that the codes of power that lay in literacy were essential to a people who were to continue to live among whites, both the powerful and the powerless. Some of them had observed the labor required to master literacy: they had watched privileged white children at their study. A Quaker group apprehended the central issue: "Great indeed is the mental darkness of that part of our land, and these people feel and know it, and eagerly do they embrace the opportunity, and earnest are their desires to qualify themselves to fill their new relations in society."[38]

What exactly did this unprecedented demand for education mean? What did the freed people see as the purpose of literacy? How did they

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Students from the Capitol Hill School, Washington, D.C., c. 1868. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/ Rare Books.

understand "their new relations in society" and the role of literacy in filling those relationships?

People in conditions analogous to the conditions of the freed people in the 1860s do not commonly leave philosophical reflections describing their expectations of processes and skills such as literacy. Nonetheless, by attending carefully to their words, and the words of those observing them, we can gain valuable glimpses into the freed people's understanding of literacy. A number of themes emerge, though all fall under one overarching purpose for literacy.

The theme most commonly reported by teachers was a desire on the part of the freed people to be able to read the Bible. Two teachers in Yorktown, Virginia, taught a large class in the daytime, and a night school of 190 students. The night school comprised "mostly grown people, who after toiling all day, come eager to learn to read, some quite old men and

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women, who, as one said to me the other night—'jes wants to larn a little Missus soes I ken read my Bible.'"[39] Lucinda Humphry wrote to the American Missionary Association from Memphis, Tennessee, in 1863, that the adult freed people with whom she worked "were pious, and I found them so anxious to learn from the Bible, that I adopted the word method of teaching, which with oral exercises, proved a success, inasmuch as I left them with their minds richly stored with some precious promises which they could read, and they could read every word contained in them."[40] Martha Johnson said of her students, "to be able to read the Bible is their great desire"; and another teacher wrote, "to be able to read the Bible for themselves, is the greatest inducement one could offer them for effort."[41]

It is not surprising that northern teachers and other northern observers reported so frequently that Bible reading was the goal of black literacy. Most thought of themselves self-consciously as missionaries first rather than teachers. Further, they were writing to northern missionary societies and their financial supporters who wanted confirmation that the freed people were amenable to northern religious influences. Yet for the freed people, Bible literacy was not simply an end in itself, nor merely an expression of black piety. It was, rather, a means to a symbolic end. To be able to read the Bible for oneself was to declare one's emancipation from white churches and from decades—centuries—of being told by white preachers what to believe. It was another aspect of the impulse that led southern blacks to abandon en masse the southern white churches they had attended all their lives in favor of black denominations: it was religious emancipation.[42]

Further, literacy as a means to read the Bible was often linked explicitly in the freed people's minds with other, more specifically political, ends. Southern African Americans knew there was much more at stake than access to sacred text. Literacy had political meaning for the freed people. Anna Kidder, working with over 200 night students, described "old gray-headed men and women coming every night to learn to read so they can 'read the Bible' they say, and sending their children day-times so they can be 'right smart' and not a bit below 'white folks.'"[43] A northern white observer, commenting on the freed people's extraordinary sacrifices for their children's education despite their astounding poverty, noted the link that the freed people made between emancipation, literacy, and equality. "The people are keen for education," he said, "which they see to be necessary to their children in the future of equal rights."[44]

Some freed people apparently associated political literacy with a rela-

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tively narrow sense of citizenship training. After his first year of teaching the freedmen in Texas, for instance, Richard Sloan wrote, "I find them very teachable and all they want is to know what our Government requires for them to do, and they will be obedient to the Lincon Government as they call it."[45] Others imagined a more critical political literacy. A black teacher in North Carolina found that the patrons of his school expected their children's education to prepare them as "fit objects of all the rights and privileges heretofore so cruelly infringed upon," and observers remarked on the role of the freed people's schools to prepare them for the franchise.[46]

Learners occasionally spoke bluntly about the political ends of literacy. While visiting a black teacher's school in Virginia, Jacob Vining, an official with a Quaker aid organization, asked the children why they came to school: " 'To learn and to mind teacher.' 'And why should you learn?' One said he knew but could not express it. A girl spoke up—'To learn to count money.' Another, 'So we can read our Bible and love God.' Then a boy,—'So we may know when people lie to us.' 'Why, how, what do you mean?' 'We can read the papers and see if what they tell us is true. They told us the Yankees had horns, and if we had read the papers we would have found it was not so before.' "[47]

Some understood the political importance of literacy to their effective use of the franchise and were aware of the nation's betrayal of their trust when, by 1870, the government had abandoned its halfhearted support of their interests and protection.[48] Ralza M. Manly, long active in support of freedmen's education in Virginia, reported in 1870, "They feel and say that the Government, having given them freedom and franchise, should not leave them in ignorance."[49]

For the freed people, in other words, emancipation meant more than the mere end of slavery, and literacy meant more than just reading the Bible. If emancipation was to be meaningful, if it was not to end in a form of freedom not far removed from slavery, it must also be political. It must promote equality, protect autonomy, and provide access to information. Literacy, the freed people hoped, would provide the means to that sort of emancipation.

Literacy also had very practical dimensions, though even the most practical reasons for literacy carried important political overtones. The freed people understood that if the full promise of emancipation was to be realized, they needed the skills to engage in a variety of enterprises and needed information to protect themselves against fraud. Literacy was one

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such skill, and an important means to self-protection. Jacob Vining's young respondent's comment, "To learn to count money," was one expression of that understanding, echoed by former slaves in Virginia who sought literacy to detect cheating and counterfeit money.[50] Likewise, in 1868 a freed man in North Carolina expressed both his vision of one possible future and his understanding of the barriers to that future without literacy: "I don't know much, but one thing I do know: I want edication, and we, as a people, want edication. We must learn to keep books and do our own business, for already the white man is marking and thinking how cheap he can hire us, and how easily he can cheat us out of our pay."[51] More pointed was the comment of a former slave woman in Florida. When asked why she was so determined to learn to read, she replied simply, "So that the Rebs can't cheat me."[52]

The idea of literacy to protect against fraud and to advance economically carried with it implicitly, and often explicitly, another of the freed people's goals of emancipation and of literacy—a sense of agency and autonomy, often expressed in gendered language as a sense of manhood. Frederick Douglass expressed that goal succinctly at the dedication of the Douglass Institute in Baltimore, Maryland: "The mission of the Institution and that of the colored race are identical. It is to teach [the race] the true idea of manly independence and self-respect."[53] A black sergeant, writing to one of his commanding officers to request more educational opportunities for the black troops, said much the same thing, if less eloquently: "We Wish to have some benefit of education To make of ourselves capable of business In the future. We wish to become a People capable of self support as we are Capable of being soldiers."[54]

Overall, the freed people understood literacy as one means to extend their emancipation beyond the minimal legal termination of bondage. Access to sacred texts would contribute to emancipating them from slaveholders' distortion of Christianity; access to privileged knowledge would strengthen black claims to equality and make them better informed voters; a literate people could better protect themselves against fraud and could enjoy broader economic prospects. Above all, literacy and the other benefits of formal education were deeply symbolic and political. They symbolized freedom from white control, and freedom to think for oneself was deeply and inevitably political. All of those benefits of literacy, the freedmen believed, would contribute to self-respect and independence. All would bolster and fortify their emancipation. Literacy and schooling were central to the freed people's emancipation project.[55]

At the Dawn of Freedom

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The reach and power of literacy are never uncontested, however. They are constantly mediated and circumscribed, their trajectory deflected, their velocity impeded. The freed people had purposes and visions for their literacy linked to their hopes for emancipation, but their teachers also had purposes and visions for the uses of literacy linked just as clearly to the teachers' expectations of emancipation in Reconstruction America. One group of teachers shared the freed people's expectations of literacy, another group may have shared some of them. The first group included the thousands of black teachers who taught in the first generation of southern black schools, many from the North, the rest former slaves or southern free blacks.[56] The second was a small group of northern white teachers who, from the outset, spoke the language of black freedom and black rights in a reconstructed southern social order.[57]

Arrayed against those teachers were the majority of teachers who held less expansive views of the ends of black literacy. For many northern white teachers, the point of literacy instruction began and ended with otherworldly concerns, or those that, though of this world, embraced primarily the task of securing the freed people to one or another northern denomination. Frequently, the teachers' expressed purpose for teaching in the South was primarily rooted in concern for their own souls, seeking, as Mary Bowers wrote, to be "useful in my Masters Vineyard" in order to gain "stars in my crown of rejoicing."[58] Such teachers were silent regarding the secular and political needs and demands of an emancipated people.

Even more problematic, however, were the thousands of southern white teachers. They accounted for more than half of all teachers in the freedmen's schools by the end of Reconstruction. Poverty and desperation drove most of the early southern white teachers to the distasteful work of teaching black students. A few may have understood black education as a chance to authentically cooperate in the reconstruction of a prostrate society. Others taught to ensure that emancipation was held within bounds acceptable to an unreconstructed white supremacy. For the latter, and doubtlessly for many of those who taught for purely monetary ends, the culture of slavery and white supremacy led, consciously in some cases, unconsciously in many cases, to teaching in ways that would assure the perpetuation of southern white mores and values. In some cases, southern white teachers' senses of the possibilities of literacy were simply irrelevant to the hopes and expectations of the freed people, though even the most benign would inevitably teach in ways that would fail to realize the fullest potential of an emancipatory literacy. In many more cases, however, those teachers' vi-

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sions of literacy were in direct and hostile contradiction to the sorts of literacy any free people must have.[59]

Henry Lee Swint wrote in 1941 that, for the freedmen, "The school had all the glamour of the new and the strange, and the printed word that particular attraction which is characteristic of all forbidden fruit."[60] There can be no doubt that the school was new and strange to many of the freed people, though there is little to suggest they saw any particular "glamour" to it. It is also true that literacy had been "forbidden fruit," though Swint was unwilling to talk about the moral and political reasons that white southerners had feared and forbidden black literacy. Nothing in the historical record, however, sustains the implication that the freed people saw literacy as an easy road to wealth and position. They did hope, perhaps too naively, that literacy would be emancipatory, or that "knowledge is power," as the black delegates to the Zion Church Colored People's Convention in Charleston, South Carolina, resolved in November 1865.[61] Historically, the actual formula may be the reverse: Power trumps knowledge, though clearly it remains preferable to have knowledge than not. In the case of southern African Americans, however, absent a broad national commitment to changing the power relations of the South, literacy would certainly prove better than illiteracy; but by itself literacy could only shore up the margins of emancipation. It was symbolically vital, but symbols alone would not change the reality on the ground.

Ultimately, neither the freedmen's vision of literacy nor the visions carried by teachers and curriculum would determine how fully emancipatory black literacy might be. Some freedmen doubtlessly mobilized their private literacy to advance their individual position, though even the most literate among them would experience the humility of disenfranchisement and segregation within half a century of formal emancipation. African Americans as a group, however, despite improving their literacy rate by well over 400 percent between the end of the war and 1900, found themselves at the nadir of their history at the century's end.[62] What literacy could not change was the distribution of power or the logic of race in the American South, no matter who the teachers were or what vision of an emancipatory literacy was dominant.

BEFORE THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, FORMAL EDUCATION STOOD SENTINEL AT two distinct social boundaries in the southern slaveholding states. One was the immutable and heavily fortified boundary between the sorts of education allowed to white learners and to black learners. The other was a more

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porous but still distinct boundary between the educations gained by different white social classes. The former boundary was inscribed in legislation outlawing literacy training for slaves and, in many states, even for free blacks; it was policed aggressively by both literate and illiterate whites. The latter was maintained by custom and a general southern indifference to public, universal education.[63]

The carefully policed educational boundary between whites and blacks bespoke a deep fear among members of the dominant race of the potential power of literacy. Southern states enacted legislation barring black literacy when slave unrest seemed to wax. Thus, South Carolina and Georgia proscribed formal schooling for their African American population in 1740, after the Stono Rebellion, and much of the rest of the South passed similar laws in the 1830s, following publication of David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* and Nat Turner's insurrection.[64]

For many southern whites, opposition to black literacy betrayed an uneasiness about white racial superiority as the bedrock of slavery: Literate African Americans in a society that imagined formal education as an accomplishment reserved for elite whites inevitably troubled the easy assumptions of the righteousness of white dominion and of slavery itself. Thus illiterate poor whites entered as enthusiastically into enforcing laws and customs regarding black literacy as did their social superiors. Nighttime slave patrols, often manned predominantly by poor whites, roamed the rural roads between plantations and scoured the back streets of the South's towns and cities, watching for signs of clandestine schools or other black literacy activity. Slaves caught reading might face whipping. Those found writing might suffer the loss of a thumb to make it difficult to hold a pen. Anyone caught teaching an African American to read risked imprisonment, fines, and corporal punishment.[65]

Slavery as an institution engraved social boundaries deeply into the South's cultural map. Emancipation as a historical moment and process threatened to obliterate that map. As slavery collapsed during the American Civil War, southern African Americans forcefully challenged the meaning of formal education as a social boundary. Despite the hardship and poverty of their new and contested status, they demanded access to literacy, built schoolhouses, recruited teachers, and attended schools, old and young, in overwhelming numbers. They expected nothing less than to remap southern social and racial boundaries. They intended to make the schoolhouse a fortress of freedom, set deep into territory long claimed by their oppressors. Where formal schooling had once symbolized elite white

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privilege, the freed people redefined it as symbolic of emancipation and independence from white control.[66] Their efforts did not, of course, go unanswered. Their southern white opponents fought ferociously to reinforce and barricade old borders and defend traditional territories.[67]

The teachers in the freed people's schools mediated that struggle. They participated in the efforts to redraw social and cultural maps, though they often did not fully share the freed people's goals and therefore surveyed educational boundaries well short of the frontiers intended by the freed people. Further, the teachers were frequently engaged in boundary keeping and border transgressions in their own worlds, quite independent of the educational and political needs framed by emancipation. Thus, while the teachers did not initiate the South's black literacy project, they inevitably were implicated in its outcomes, through the intentions of their work, the limitations of their imaginations, and the distractions of their own struggles. We turn now to their stories.

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